Will Trump Shatter the Party of Reagan?

The rogue candidate threatens the coalition of social, economic, and foreign policy conservatives.

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Ronald Reagan is long gone, but for decades Republicans have continued to revere his allegorical three-legged stool: economic, social, and foreign policy conservatives, united as one to carry the party to victory.

So what happens when reality-TV star and self-styled "common-sense conservative" Donald Trump gets stewardship of the GOP? He insists that Social Security and Medicare should be left unaltered, defends the non-abortion related work of Planned Parenthood, and calls NATO obsolete—thereby offending all three elements of the Reagan trinity.

"He shatters the stool when he sits on it," said Ari Fleischer, a top aide to

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former President George W. Bush. “It’s bizarre, because he has no principled, coherent ideology that we’re used to.... It certainly won’t resemble the stool anymore.”

What last autumn might have been an idle intellectual exercise is about to become, at least for “movement” conservatives, an urgent question. In as little as two months, Trump may well be the presumptive presidential nominee and titular head of the party of Reagan.

“At the most basic level, this is a party that believed it had a good shot at keeping the House and the Senate and winning the White House,” said Ramesh Ponnuru of the conservative American Enterprise Institute. “With him as the nominee, we have a shot at losing all three. So yes, I think it would be serious trouble.”

For Republicans still interested in the “smaller government, more freedom” philosophical underpinnings of their party that stretch back to Barry Goldwater’s 1964 candidacy, the possibility of a Trump nomination becomes even more unsettling.

“I don’t use the term lightly, but I really do think it creates an existential crisis for the Republican Party,” said Norman Ornstein, a scholar at AEI. “He represents so much that is anathema to what has been the core set of values to Republican leadership.”

With Trump almost certain to enter the summer convention with the most delegates thanks to his many primary victories thus far, Republicans have two choices: Give Trump the nomination, and make him the face of the GOP, or give it to someone else, and likely drive his millions of supporters away from the party, possibly for years.

“Either way, it brings down the curtain not only on the Reagan party, but the Goldwater party,” Ponnuru predicted.

What would come next is less clear, and would depend partly on whether the GOP nominee wins in November, and also on how the party leadership goes about repairing the cracks. Thomas Mann of the liberal Brookings Institution wonders if that’s even possible, given all that has happened.

“It’s hard to see how they breathe new life into a party that’s suffered a hostile takeover,” Mann said. “It almost looks like it’s time for a replacement party.”

A reinvention wouldn’t be the first for the party, which in its 160-year history has already undergone at least two major transformations.

Founded in 1854 by abolitionists, Republicans came to be defined initially by their first president, Abraham Lincoln, whose struggle to hold

the nation together was for decades reviled in much of the South as "The War of Northern Aggression." The subsequent Reconstruction years, overseen by Republican administrations, cemented the Democratic Party's dominance in Southern states, as did Republican efforts in the first half of the 20th century to pass civil-rights legislation through Congress.

In that period, particularly in the decades leading up to World War II, the party aligned itself more closely with business and financial elites while advocating restraint in foreign affairs. President Franklin Roosevelt's efforts to help Britain in the years preceding Pearl Harbor, for example, were derided as "Mr. Roosevelt's war."

The victory of Allied commander Gen. Dwight Eisenhower over the GOP establishment in 1952 and the start of the Cold War pushed the party to a more interventionist foreign policy position. But the more fundamental shift followed Democratic President Lyndon Johnson's successful push of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Richard Nixon was able to capitalize on white, working-class anger toward Democrats, particularly in the South, and cobbled together a new coalition that delivered Republicans the presidency in five out of the next six elections.

It was a dramatic recasting: The party created to end slavery had engineered a "Southern Strategy" dependent on the states that had seceded from the Union. And as demographic changes made the country less white and moved states from Republican to toss-up to Democratic, the GOP reliance on the South grew ever more pronounced.

In the 2012 presidential election, Republican nominee Mitt Romney won 206 electoral votes, of which 118 came from the 11 states of the former Confederacy—even though they account for only a third of the country's population. Nationally, he won 59 percent of the white vote, but only 16 percent of the nonwhite vote.

Yet the Republicans' message to their new base of disproportionately Southern, predominantly non-college-educated whites has consisted largely of social and cultural cues—assurances that Republicans sided with them on things such as prayer in schools, abortion, and gun rights—rather than economic themes.

That, in fact, was the thesis of Thomas Frank's 2004 book, *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, which explored why voters in that state typically support Republican candidates even though their economic interests are more in line with Democrats.

What Trump has done with his candidacy is harvest many of those same white, working-class voters but with the message that his business experience will let him restore the prosperity and status they have lost—all

perience will let him restore the prosperity and status they have lost—all mixed in with a subtext of standing against the "others" who have been changing America, such as Latinos and Muslims.

To Brooking's Mann, Trump's success is justified comeuppance for a party that has vilified the nation's first black president. "The Republican Party in recent years have set themselves up for this," he said, pointing out that Trump himself was a leading purveyor of the theory that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and is therefore an illegitimate president. "They effectively sanctioned the most hateful speech. Now they're in no position to control it."

Party leaders, though, did try to change the tone, at least for a while. After Romney's loss, the Republican National Committee conducted an "autopsy" that warned that the party had to improve its outreach to non-white voters, and urged passage of an immigration overhaul as a good way to start. But that effort was blocked in the House by members from conservative, largely white districts—a decision that appeared to be validated by GOP successes in the 2014 mid-term elections.

"There was this thinking: We've got these voters no matter what. All we've got to do is talk about the threat posed by the Kenyan socialist," Ornstein said.

Ponnuru, who ascribes Trump's success more to his appeal to nationalism than racial grievance, nevertheless agrees that the party's reliance on a tax-cut-oriented economic policy favored by the donor class rather than the working class was a mistake. Republicans' failure to pass a credible alternative to Obama's Affordable Care Act, for example, will continue to hurt the party among those drawn to Trump.

"They'll take affordable health care over limited government," Ponnuru said.

Yet regardless of why and how Republicans got to this point, the path forward appears to depend entirely on the individual at the center of their current predicament: Trump himself.

If he loses the nomination, does he go away amicably, or blow up the GOP on his way out? If he wins the nomination but loses the general election, does he abandon politics, or continue to stir the pot with frequent speeches and TV appearances?

"If Trump sticks around, it could have huge ramifications, because it would make it enormously difficult for the party to reset," said Fleischer, who was among the coauthors of the 2013 Growth and Opportunity Project report.

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And if Trump somehow overcomes his soaring unpopularity with women and nonwhite voters and wins the presidency, that would bring an even more fundamental re-branding of the GOP, Fleischer said. “The party becomes basically unrecognizable,” he said. “Obama didn’t change anything. This would be change.”

Added AEI’s Ornstein: “This is uncharted territory for modern times. It’s hard to see where this goes. … The bottom line is you cannot come out of this with a thriving, intact party.”

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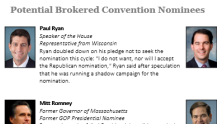

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